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AUTHOR Genishi, Celia; Fassler, Rebekah
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ABSTRACT

Noting that children's talk makes some of their thinking visible and thereby provides a ready tool for early childhood teachers, this chapter focuses on the process of language acquisition. The chapter provides a historical context for language in early childhood education, discussing the nature of language and its acquisition, the development of communicative competence in the early childhood classroom, and curricula that build on children's oral communicative abilities. The chapter notes that language has been a special issue in early childhcod education in the United States for the last 30 years, as social programs and movements of the 1960s and 1970 influenced public expectations for preschool and primary education. The components of language are described, along with its acquisition through interaction with others. Also summarized are: research on early communication; the development of syntax; and various contexts for the development of communicative competence, including the socioeconomic status of the family. The chapter then considers issues and choices involved in developing communicative competence in the early childhood classroom, focusing on multiculturalism, dialect differences and the match between home and school, and developmentally appropriate practice and meeting the needs of all children. Variations in the use of language in the classroom are explored, focusing on the importance of story, especially in dramatic play, and talking across the curriculum. The chapter concludes by noting that the talk teachers hear in the classroom represents a small part of a child's linguistic and communicative competence; suggestions are included for teachers to ease the transition to school talk. (Contains 77 references.) (KB)

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CHAPTER 3

Oral Language in the Early Childhood Classroom: Building on Diverse Foundations

CELIA GENISHI
REBEKAH FASSLER

Amy Detjen

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FROM THEIR earliest days, children are participants in the world around them. Oral language, the focus of this chapter, offers them access to a number of communities in that world. This is especially noticeable in classroom communities where increasing numbers of young children are learning in a language they do not speak at home. Like the children in this example (drawn from Fassler, 1995), they use language, gestures, and the people around them as resources in their attempts to participate in the events of school:

> Children are being introduced to drawing life-sized portraits on brown paper. Mrs. Barker, the teacher, has traced Ogusan's body outline, and is calling upon children individually to color in details of features and clothing. Jerry, whose home language is Chinese, uses Chinese and English to weave a web of relationships among his peers. In this whole-group situation he has trouble getting Mrs. Barker's attention so that he can take a turn at coloring part of the portrait. "Do you get a turn?" Ogusan (a Turkish speaker) asks Jerry. Jerry answers plaintively, "I can't get a turn," and Daniel (an Albanian speaker) chimes in:
>
> DANIEL: No, you don't get a chance?
> JERRY: I like this (raises hand). Teacher not pick me.
> OGUSAN: Raise your hand like this (raises his).
> JERRY: I like this (raises hand).

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> DANIEL: And the teacher don't give you?
> JERRY: No.
>
> Moments later, when Mrs. Barker asks, "Who did not get a chance?" Daniel points out Jerry's raised hand, "Mrs. Barker, him!" She looks up, finally notices Jerry's hand, and invites him to come forward, "Jerry, Jerry, do one shoe." (p. 174)

Jerry and his friends know something about the ways words, sentences, and ideas are constructed through language. And they demonstrate that, like most children, they must learn how to convey meanings in particular ways—in North America usually in English—to negotiate the world of school. Jerry is aware that there are languages other than the one he uses at home. He is a member of a Chinese-speaking community at the same time that he is entering the English-speaking world and the overlapping community of the literate.

How do children learn a first language? What is known about how Jerry, Ogusan, and Daniel became the speakers and learners that they are? How large a role has the adult played to encourage talk and interaction? What issues in the field of early childhood education are reflected in such interaction and influence the kind of curriculum children will experience? This chapter addresses these questions by focusing on the following topics related to the processes of language acquisition: the historical context of language in early childhood education; the nature of language and its acquisition; developing communicative competence in the classroom—issues and choices; and curricula that build on children's oral communicative abilities.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the last 30 years, language has been a special issue in early childhood education in the United States. The social programs and movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including Head Start and the women's movement, affected public expectations for preschool and primary education. People looked to compensatory programs such as Head Start as forces for social and economic reform. A variety of social groups, including ethnic minorities, participated in changing the structure and look of early education, especially at the preschool level. Parents became an integral part of administrative groups for Head Start and sometimes for day care centers and schools.

Because the dialect or language of minority group children is often

different from that of middle-class children, traditional views of language in schools have been challenged since the 1960s. Twenty-five or more years ago most people assumed that there was one kind of English with which teachers needed to be concerned: standard (newscasters' or textbook) English. When educators or researchers wrote about varieties or different dialects of English, they often wrote about them as if dialects were inappropriate and incorrect. For example, in a report of pioneering research about the language of elementary school children, Loban (1963) stated in his summary of findings: "For Negro subjects with southern background, using appropriately the verb *to be* proves to be 12 times as troublesome as for northern Caucasian or Negro subjects" (p. 85).

Later, in the 1960s, linguists such as Labov (1970) demonstrated that speakers of vernacular dialects of English, including what many call black English, use forms of the verb *to be* in ways that are consistently different from standard English forms. These different uses are not "troublesome" within the Black English-speaking community. Smitherman (1994) provided the example of *be* or *bees* to indicate continuous action, as in "Every time we see him, he be dressed like that" (p. 7). Speakers of Black English, which Smitherman refers to as AAE (African American English), also omit *is* or *are*, especially in contractions, as in "What up?" instead of "What's up?"

By 1985 a number of books had been written about Black English (Burling, 1973; Labov, 1972). Many authors emphasized the fact that *everyone* uses a dialect and that the term *dialect* is neutral, not negative. Educators' understanding of variation in language grew, so that they no longer assumed that standard English was the only acceptable dialect for classroom settings. When the federal Bilingual Education Act of 1968 marked the recognition that a growing number of U.S. students spoke a language other than English, the horizons of language education expanded even further. Broadened views of language led educators to reconsider their goals for young children's learning at the same time that parents and practitioners called for "culturally relevant" education. Taking into account the culture and previous experiences of children led to the creation of some innovative programs and curricula. These included the frequent use of languages other than English, for example, the Rough Rock Navajo and the Tucson (Spanish) Language Experience models (John & Horner, 1971), or the incorporation of Black English features into materials for the teaching of reading (Simpkins, Simpkins, & Holt, 1977).

By the 1980s, policy makers and the public wondered about the effectiveness of compensatory programs, even though some studies (for example, Schweinhart & Weikart, 1980) showed the long-term benefits of Head Start. As a group, minority children still achieve less well in school

than majority or mainstream children. Educators and researchers continue to ask why this happens. They study children's home and school environments as they try to discover what kinds of experiences and curricula might improve learning and teaching for all groups. So in recent decades the educator's domain of concern extends beyond the classroom to the home.

In the late 1990s language is still a primary issue in the field. Classrooms in which the majority of children are second-language learners and come from many different language backgrounds have become the rule rather than an exception in many urban areas. More and more teachers are seeking strategies to encourage full participation of children from all language backgrounds in the academic and social life of the classroom. The paucity of native English speakers as language models in these settings highlights the importance of research that examines how young non-native English speakers might support and enhance each other's learning (Fassler, 1995, 1998).

At the same time, there has been much discussion of the need for "developmentally appropriate" practices that are respectful of the child's culture (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) and for curricula that acknowledge the diversity of young children and their families (De Gaetano, Williams, & Volk, 1998; Gregory, 1997). How aspects of language learning fit within appropriate ways of educating children is a subject of debate, revolving around topics such as "dialect differences," "multiculturalism," and "developmentally appropriate" curricula. Each topic reflects persistent concerns of educators and parents, and each will be discussed below in the section on "Developing Communicative Competence in the Classroom: Issues and Choices."

In linguistics and language acquisition, researchers have expanded their areas of study in tandem with educators. Linguists now focus on functions of language across different situations, along with rules related to its forms. Researchers discuss the growth of communication, not just language, and the boundary between spoken and written uses of language is blurred. Further, the processes of acquisition that they study are those of working-class and minority, not just middle-class, children. The findings of researchers whose work is most pertinent to early childhood language education are discussed in the next section.

LANGUAGE AND THE PROCESSES OF ACQUISITION

We take for granted our ability to make language do what we need it to do. In or out of the classroom, language gives our thoughts substance. As

we talk to ourselves, language helps us to remember, plan, understand what happens to us, and formulate ideas. Language is part of the individual's uniquely human way of knowing, feeling, being. As we use language with others, it shapes our identities and social lives. The way our own language sounds to listeners leads them to make judgments about where we are from, what our occupation is, how friendly or clever we are.

We easily see what language does, and we can see this without having to describe what it is. Understanding what language is, how it is structured, and how it works is the task of linguists who describe language in terms of components. These are summarized below to show just how impressive—for adult and child—the feat of learning a language is.

Each language component is made up of parts and the rules that enable speakers to combine those parts. *Phonology* refers to the sounds of a language. English speakers easily produce the sounds of English, and without knowing the word *ruddle*, will know that it sounds like a possible English word, whereas *fwoodr* does not. English speakers also know the *morphology* of their language, or the rules for how morphemes are combined to form words. (Words like *happy*, *look*, or *jump* or parts of words like *-ing* or *un-* are morphemes.)

The way we combine morphemes in an utterance or sentence is known as *syntax*. We know that in this sentence, "Carla is jumping," the morphemes are arranged in a way that makes sense to English speakers. We say *Carla* before *is* and *is* before *jumping*. We would not ordinarily say "Jumping is Carla" or "Carla jumping is," although we could say "Is Carla jumping?" and change the meaning of the sentence. We are no longer telling; we are asking. Linguists would describe the change from a declarative ("Carla is jumping") to a question ("Is Carla jumping?") in terms of the syntactic rules the speaker knows about forming questions. One of these rules for question formation has to do with saying *is* before *Carla*.

Finally, *pragmatics* relates not to combining morphemes within sentences but to combining sentences with other sentences. Here linguists are concerned with rules for carrying on conversations, for using language in human interaction. Because rules of usage are different for different groups (e.g., New Yorkers may find appropriate something that Coloradans think is offensive), pragmatic rules are slippery. They include rules about what kind of answer may follow a question in order to be judged polite or appropriate in a particular situation. For example, saying a simple, "Yes," after someone asks, "Do you know how to get to 14th Street?" is not appropriate, whereas following the "Yes" with directions to 14th Street is.

In summary, we know a great many rules, rules for combining

sounds into morphemes, morphemes into words, words into sentences, sentences into conversations. The wonder is that no one explicitly teaches us these rules. Yet like kindergartners Jerry, Ogusan, and Daniel, we apply them without being aware of them. We know them in an unconscious way and that knowledge—sometimes called *linguistic competence*—enables us able to use language as we need to.

Most people easily go through life without defining the components of language or reflecting on the marvels of the human mind that enable people to learn and use language. They have no need to study it or understand how an individual learns it. Why should early childhood educators understand what language is and how it comes to be? One reason is that language acquisition is a major part of human development. In fact, when it comes to oral language, children have experienced a rich and spontaneous "curriculum" since birth. Understanding what they know and how they come to know it can aid the teacher in planning activities and teaching strategies that build on children's ways of learning. Another reason to know about this aspect of development is that language is at the center of school learning. Almost every area of the curriculum entails language in the teaching/learning process. Third, as noted earlier, increasing numbers of children enter early childhood settings with a language other than English. Knowing that children acquire a first language so well at an early age helps teachers see that children are healthy learners, regardless of what language they use. How do children come to know the language they bring with them to the classroom?

Learning Language Through Interaction

The process of learning language is enormously complicated. Thus theories that explain how children acquire it cannot be simple. For example, according to a strict *innatist* theory, a person's genes are the sole source of language and communicative development; a child born with no physical handicaps should learn language. Unfortunately, researchers know that this is not the case. A child whose physical needs are met but lacks any opportunity for social interaction does not become a language user (Curtiss, 1977). At the other extreme, a strict *behaviorist* theory grounds communicative development only in the environment—what is outside the learner. From this point of view, children learn what they hear around them through imitation, repetition, and reinforcement. Children do imitate what they hear, and they learn the language of those around them; but they also say things they have never heard before, such as "goed" or "footses" or "Why you putted it there?" They use these forms even when no one reinforces or encourages them to do so. These forms—what adults

would call mistakes—suggest that a full explanation of how children acquire language must include children's ability to think and formulate rules for themselves.

Current theories about language acquisition are neither strictly innatist nor behaviorist. Most child language specialists believe that acquiring language depends on interaction between nature and nurture, between genes and the environment. Human beings are biologically prepared to use language in ways that no other organism is. What is with a person at birth, however, must be cultivated by an environment consisting of other people, objects, and actions, the essentials of interaction and bases of development. The theoretical approach of many researchers of children's communication is, therefore, termed *interactionist* and *constructivist* (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978). The process of acquisition is based on the interaction of inborn abilities to formulate rules, act physically upon the environment, and seek social interaction. The child constructs, through her or his own activity and thinking in varied social situations, knowledge about how language works.

Early Language or Early Communication?

In the 1960s and early 1970s, child language researchers focused on the development of *language*, primarily the syntactic rules of child speakers. What words did they say first? How did children combine their first two words? Were the combinations similar to adult forms? By the mid-1970s researchers had taken a step back, toward infancy, to investigate the foundations of language. Researchers broadened their focus to study the growth of *communicative competence*, a person's ability to speak and act appropriately in different social situations. This competence depends on many kinds of knowledge: knowledge of linguistic rules (the speaker's linguistic competence) as well as of social rules for appropriate verbal and nonverbal behavior. Young children are in the process of learning these complicated rules for communicating, which develop in a broad range of contexts.

To document ways in which communication develops, Stern (1977) watched mothers and children, between birth and age 6 months, "dance" with each other. From the first weeks of life, each partner accommodated the other; the child's smile was followed by the mother's smile, for example. These early behaviors are elementary, but researchers believe they underlie more complex interaction in the future. During and after the first 6 months of life, infants communicate in nonverbal ways, and they also vocalize—or coo and babble—using sounds that will eventually be combined into adultlike words. Sometime after the first birthday, most

children begin to verbalize. They use words like *juice, car,* or *up* to refer to their concrete world. As they become competent communicators, the dance between caregivers and themselves continues as each child expands his or her role in interaction to coordinate words with previously learned nonverbal behaviors and actions.

Nelson (1973) studied early words by documenting the first 50 words of 18 one- to two-year-olds. She found that most of these words were nouns like *sock, key,* and *shoe,* which named things that were common in the child's environment, movable and handled by the children themselves. These objects were the basis for children's actions; first words were grounded in sensory and physical activity. More recently Nelson has investigated early words as part of the broader process of children's conceptual development (Nelson, 1985, 1986). She sees as critical the ordinary and repeated experiences of infants' lives. What the child comes to know and remember is an *event* or whole episode of an activity such as feeding or bathing. Over time this event is mentally represented and broken down or analyzed into component parts. These are eventually labeled, but only after many occurrences of the event. Thus the child's actions, experience, and cognitive abilities to represent, remember, and analyze all contribute to the making of a young language user.

Although Nelson provides insights into how children learn words as a by-product of sensory and physical experiences, other researchers (Barrett, 1982; Clark, 1983) propose alternatives to Nelson's approach. According to these researchers, children may first name common objects in their environment, but to acquire the full meaning of a word, they may need to go through an unconscious analysis of its features. They note features that are functional (how is a shoe used?) and perceptual (what is its shape, size, texture, and so on?). At first, children may refer only to their shoes as shoes; then they may focus on noticeable features, for example, the shoe's shape. For a short while they may call both shoes and house slippers "shoes," but over time they are finally able to identify the features that set shoes apart from boots and slippers. At this point, children have acquired the bundle of features and concepts that define the word. Along the way, the young child, intent on communicating about what is new to him, makes the most of what he already knows to make sense of experience (Wong Fillmore, 1976).

Beyond the stage of using one word at a time, most children continue to expand their vocabularies with an impressive effortlessness and speed. G. A. Miller and Gildea (1987) point out that the average number of words learned a day as children acquire their first language is about 10, a number that suggests a large number of "events" and experiences from which to draw new concepts and words. (See Genishi [1988b] for further

discussion of word learning.) In addition, researchers have found that varied experiences are critical not only at the early childhood level. Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, and Hemphill (1991) indicate that second- through sixth-graders who make progress in literacy learning in the classroom had teachers who stressed vocabulary learning *in context*, that is, in all content areas. They used diverse materials, such as maps, trade books, comic books, and encyclopedias, and experience-broadening activities such as field trips. Thus the need for experience as a source of verbal knowledge extends well beyond the early childhood years.

Combining Words: The Development of Syntax

Linguists and psychologists interested in child language in the 1960s focused not on the acquisition of words but on rules of syntax, which guide the ways we combine words to form grammatical utterances. Pioneers in this search included Brown and his collaborators (Brown, Cazden, & Bellugi, 1969; W. Miller & Ervin, 1964). These and other psycholinguists recorded and studied thousands of utterances to discover the rules children unconsciously use to combine their first words in conversations. An example is this conversation between Karen, 19 months old, and her father, who is watching television and attending to both his daughter and an adult visitor:

> KAREN: Mommy tape. Mommy tape. Mommy tape. Mommy tape. Mommy tape.
> FATHER: Invisible mending tape ("translating" for other adult).
> ADULT: Oh!
> FATHER: You can have *this* much (shows with his thumb and index finger how long the piece can be).
> KAREN: Daddy knee (pointing toward his face). (Genishi & Dyson, 1984, p. 46)

The rules underlying Karen's two-word utterances are part of her early grammar; over a period of years she will construct a number of grammars, not just one. Note that by using a simple rule for combining a noun with another noun ("Mommy tape"), Karen has managed to start a conversation about tape. She refers to the mending tape as her mother's; later she cryptically calls Daddy's face his "knee," perhaps making a joke. In another conversation, she may apply a rule to combine noun and verb, as in "Daddy sleep." In a few weeks or months she might say "Mommy's tape" and "Daddy's knee," and eventually she might add *-ed* to all verbs

to form a past tense, as in *walked, goed,* or *hided,* probably even to verbs that have irregular past forms (*went, hid*). These constructions are especially informative when they occur consistently, since they reveal what the child's own rules are. Well before kindergarten age, then, children's speech reflects their knowledge of basic syntactic rules.

In addition to noting spontaneous child utterances—such as "two feets," "Bubba eating," or "Gram goed"—researchers have tested children's rules experimentally. Berko (1958) created an ingenious test for tapping children's knowledge of specific rules for combining morphemes, or parts of words, to form other words. Berko used nonsense words, such as *wug, gling,* and *spow,* to see whether children aged 4 to 7 years could look at a picture related to the word and then form an appropriate new word. A child might respond that a picture of more than one *wug* (drawn like a cartoon animal) was a picture of *wugs.* Or the experimenter might show a picture of a man doing something he called *spowing* to see if the child could say that the man *spowed* yesterday. Berko concluded that children who were able to produce such forms as plural, progressive tense, and past tense with nonsense words also knew rules for producing these forms with ordinary English words. Along with their spontaneous "mistakes" (*goed, hided*) in conversation, children's responses on the Berko test prove that children learn language by means other than strict imitation of adult forms. Instead they unconsciously construct and apply the rules of their developing grammars.

Researchers in the 1970s shifted their focus from syntax to meaning, or semantics. Their question became: What do children's early word combinations mean? One syntactic structure could have more than one meaning; for example, "Mommy juice" could mean "Mommy's juice," or "Mommy, give me juice," and so on. Brown believed a satisfactory explanation of possible meanings was based on a "rich interpretation." According to this view, young speakers are able to convey a variety of basic meanings and relationships (Brown, 1973). "Mommy juice" might express the relationship technically called possession or agent (the "doer") + object (what "receives" the action). At other times children use language to convey the meaning of nomination (naming things, as in "this doggie") or of nonexistence (remarking on the disappearance of a person or object, as in "allgone car"). Those meanings will continue to be the foundation of what speakers say throughout the language acquisition process. The utterances and rules underlying them eventually become much more elaborate, but behind the technical terms describing any utterance, Brown believes there is always an active, thinking, meaning-seeking, and meaning-creating child.

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Contexts for the Development of Communicative Competence

We know that most children learn to communicate in a first language. We know, too, that children learning the same language differ in the rate at which they learn language but follow the same general sequence as they learn linguistic forms. A particular 2-year-old may be able to say more than her 3-year-old sister did at age 2, but in the course of development, both will utter one word before two, simple sentences before complex sentences. What in the child's environment is absolutely necessary for this learning to take place? Researchers are far from knowing the answer. This section presents examples of interaction in different contexts to illustrate the range of situations that successfully support communicative development.

ADULT: Bo-o-at. Puppy dog. What's a dog say, Robert? What's a dog say, huh?
CHILD: [Babbles]
ADULT: Hey, Chrissy, what's a dog say? What's a dog say? Arf, arf, arf!
CHILD: [Screams happily]
ADULT: No-o-se. No-o-se. Where's Chrissy nose? Um hmmmm. Bird. Bird. Can you flap your wings like a bird? Like this. That's what birds do. They fly. They go wheee!
CHILD: [Noises]
ADULT: The birds. Whatcha got, Brian? Whatcha got? Uh boo! (Genishi & Dyson, 1984, p. 65)

This conversation was overheard in the infant room of a day-care center, where the caregiver shared a picture book with three children. Her talk has many of the characteristics, which adults may find cute or silly, of "baby talk," or adult-talk-to-children (ATC). Researchers have been interested in this way of adjusting one's speech for young children because they suspect that it provides a simplified model for child language learners (Schachter & Strage, 1982). Some of the features of ATC are

1. Short utterances
2. Lots of repetition
3. Vowel lengthening (as in no-o-se)
4. Exaggerated intonation (extreme ups and downs)
5. Lots of questions

Much of the research that describes ATC has been done with middle-class standard English–speaking mothers and children. And many middle-class

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families, whatever their race or ethnicity, engage in conversations similar to the one above. One of its features is that the adult often asks questions to which she already knows the answer. After the child responds, nonverbally or verbally, the adult encouragingly asks another question. Researchers have called this and other gamelike exchanges a *routine* or *format* (Bruner, 1983) and have found that in some homes, the routine changes over time.

For many middle-class adults, routines are a staple of adult–child interaction both at home and in school. Heath (1983b) has pointed out that not every child has engaged in this kind of talk and that adults who are not middle-class may judge this talk to be pointless. A grandmother in a working-class Black community had this to say about her grandson Teegie's learning and talking: "He gotta learn to know 'bout dis world, can't nobody tell 'im. . . . Gotta watch hisself by watchin' other folks. Ain't no use me tellin' im: Learn dis, learn dat. What's dis? What's dat?" (Heath, 1983b, p. 84). Teegie's grandmother captures the child-rearing values and life circumstances of her own community when she emphasizes Teegie's ability to figure things out on his own. As she implies, children in other communities may hear instead frequent lessonlike routines in which adults often ask, "What's this? What's that?"

The communicative ways of White working-class families also vary from a middle-class "standard," as Heath (1983b), P. Miller (1982) in South Baltimore, and Tizard and Hughes (1984) in the United Kingdom have vividly documented. And in more geographically remote Papua New Guinea, Schieffelin (1979) found that adults do not use "baby talk" features in their speech and believe that any parent should be discouraged from using them so that their children can learn language normally. Thus different communities have their own beliefs about language socialization processes: how adults should talk to children and how children learn to talk. As Heath puts it, they all have their own "ways with words." No one "way" is superior to another, and families everywhere raise children who learn the complex social and linguistic rules of their community.

To summarize briefly the major points of this section:

1. Language is an enormously complex system through which people construct and convey meaning. Its main components are *semantics* (the system of meanings), *phonology* (the sound system), *syntax* (the rules for combining morphemes in sentences), and *pragmatics* (the rules underlying conversations).
2. Imitation is not the key to acquiring language. The active, thinking,

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meaning-seeking, and meaning-constructing child, in interaction with people and things, gradually figures out for herself or himself the intricacies of language and communication.

3. All normal children develop communicative competence within their own communities. Different communities' ways of talking and communicating may vary widely, and researchers are just beginning to study these ways in communities that are not middle-class. Thus we cannot make judgments about what social contexts are "better" than others or what specific features in the contexts are essential for children's communicative development to occur.

DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN THE CLASSROOM: ISSUES AND CHOICES

It is crucial to respect the out-of-school social contexts in which children learn their families' ways of communicating, but not everyone agrees on how to act upon that respect. How educators value a child's dialect or language and how they teach about language in early childhood settings depend largely on each educator's values and personal understandings of a curriculum that is responsive to a wide range of children. Embedded in the construction of such a curriculum are some overlapping topics, including *multiculturalism, dialect differences,* and *developmentally appropriate practice.* These topics may become controversial issues primarily when children in the same setting have diverse social and linguistic backgrounds or when these backgrounds differ from the teacher's or school's. In this section issues most closely related to language education are considered as a prelude to a look at examples of classroom practices.

Multiculturalism and Language Choice

Questions have been raised about *whose* culture, language, or dialect should dominate in both classrooms and other institutions. Some answers to the questions are presented here in the context of a broad vision of multicultural education, whose advocates work toward "awareness of, respect for, and enjoyment of the diversity of our society and world" (Ramsey, Vold, & Williams, 1989, p. ix). In this view multicultural education is not restricted to minority-group children and aims toward equity for all members of society (see also Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force, 1989; Goodwin, 1997). This definition provides no facile prescriptions for educators who wish to bring multiculturalism to life in the classroom, but

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it does provide space for *choices* that educators can make, for example, regarding dialect or language use.

Dialects and "Success" in School. Research consistently shows that children who are academically successful in school, especially in language arts and reading, come from homes where the ways of interacting are similar to those of the school; or they come from homes in which parents or adults share the school's values and goals (Durkin, 1982; Heath, 1983b). Put another way, children whose out-of-school experiences have *not* provided them with a "hidden curriculum"—including the school's ways with words—may have difficulty with academic tasks.

What should schools do to make the "hidden curriculum" visible to all children? In terms of language, many would say that one of the school's obligations is to "teach" children the forms and content of "school talk," or standard English. Unfortunately, no one has demonstrated that a second dialect can be taught, at least in direct, lessonlike ways. Few studies look carefully at changes in dialect use in individual speakers over time, and long-term evaluations of instructional methods are also lacking (but see Stockman [1984] for a study of acquisition of Black English). Past attempts to teach standard English forms in highly structured ways have not succeeded, whereas teachers' acceptance and encouragement of children's own language forms have led to greater learning (Cullinan, Jaggar, & Strickland, 1974; Piestrup, 1973; Rentel & Kennedy,1972).

Different Languages and the Match Between Home and School. Teachers in early childhood settings and statisticians both note that the number of children in the United States speaking languages other than English at home is increasing significantly. The number of non–English speaking children is highest in urban areas. For example, in New York City at least 17% of all children enrolled from kindergarten to grade 12 are termed "limited English proficient," an increase of 7% since 1988. Of this segment, the two largest language groups are Spanish speakers (67.5%) and Chinese speakers (9.3%). Officials have identified a total of 145 different language groups from 197 different countries of origin (New York City Board of Education, 1996–97).

Questions about appropriate programs for these children are enormously complex and, as with dialect issues, revolve around choices that are not only linguistic but also social and political (Valdes, 1997). As the twentieth century ends, a few states in the United States have approved "English only" as their official language, and legal immigrants are fearful of losing benefits they have had in the past. Thus political reactions to linguistic and cultural differences can have significant consequences.

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Regardless of political climate, researchers agree on two points: (1) Learning two or more languages in early childhood is in itself not harmful or "confusing"; in fact it may be beneficial to cognitive development (Hakuta & Diaz, 1984); and (2) learning a second language, like learning the first, occurs over a period of time, sometimes years (Genesee, 1994; Wong Fillmore, 1991). A third point is more controversial. Based on a limited number of studies, researchers support the maintenance of the home language while learners develop a second language. That is, they say *adding* a second language to a simultaneously growing foundation in the first language strengthens learning in general (Cummins, 1994). Thus a transitional program that employs children's home language for only a short period of time, for example, a year, may be ineffective for most second-language learners.

Regarding choices among curricula, parents and teachers vary. Some would like the home language maintained in school as a way of supporting the children's culture, so that Spanish-speaking children would use Spanish for part of the day at school. But often parents are more concerned with their children's learning English than maintaining their home language (Wong Fillmore, 1991). In many parts of the United States, alternatives to exclusively English-speaking classrooms are lacking. Particularly at the prekindergarten level, there are few programs and curricula that are widely available and even fewer that have been both explicitly described and carefully evaluated (see Soto, 1991). The current consensus regarding appropriate curricula, even with older learners, is that explicit teaching about the *forms* of English is not useful; being able to *use* English, as well as hear it in comprehensible ways, is critical (Krashen, 1985).

In keeping with this emphasis on language use, classroom teachers Fournier, Steen, Lansdowne, and Pastenes and teacher educator Hudelson (1992) describe a second-grade Spanish–English bilingual classroom that emphasizes the use of both languages in every part of the curriculum. They do not claim to be typical of other bilingual classrooms, but they present their own rationale for a language-rich, "whole-language," teacher-evaluated program. Also, they present enough detail in their presentation to aid others in developing their own curricula for children of diverse backgrounds, not just bilinguals.

What Is Multiculturally and Developmentally Appropriate?

For purposes of this chapter, a program that is both multicultural and developmentally appropriate *takes into account the nature of each learner.* In this kind of program, teachers are trusted to know the children as indi-

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viduals in contexts, with particular social, cultural, and linguistic histories. Which curriculum a child experiences is not determined by the score on a "readiness test," and the curricular activities are not dictated by a publisher or textbook. Published materials may play a role, but teachers' judgments, guided by children's responses and actions, are primary. This broad, child-oriented notion of developmental appropriateness has been a familiar one to early childhood teachers for many years. Descriptions and elaborations of appropriate curriculum within today's context are becoming available (this volume is an example; see also DeGaetano et al., 1997; Harris, 1991).

At the same time, educators legitimately ask whether there can be a *single* developmentally appropriate approach that meets all children's needs. Speaking from an African American perspective, Delpit (1988) presents an eloquent argument in favor of carefully considering approaches that narrow rather than broaden children's options. For example, according to some definitions, programs that are referred to as "child-centered," "whole language," or "process-oriented" include little direct teaching of skills (including letter–sound correspondences) to children. Yet direct teaching is what many African-American parents expect and want. From Delpit's point of view, waiting for children who lack such skills to "discover" them on their own is a failure to teach. Other educators make related points (Schickedanz, 1989; Throne, 1994), especially regarding the futility of advocating a single theoretical or pedagogical position. They conclude that most children need a combination of approaches that include teaching specific information and skills, along with time for the holistic activities that lead to discovery and understanding. Using a musical analogy, Delpit (1988) highlights the need for teachers to combine approaches and "to coach those [student] voices to produce notes that will be heard clearly in the larger society" (p. 296). Access to the larger society—to its social and economic opportunities—is what virtually every family wants for its children. The characteristics of classrooms that may enhance this access are considered next.

LANGUAGE IN THE CLASSROOM

Language in the classroom takes on many forms. In some classrooms it's inaudible as children sit quietly filling in worksheets, which contain little written language. In others it's both audible and visible as children interact through talk and print as if they are participating in a language "bath" (Dyson & Genishi, 1993; Lindfors, 1987). Still other settings are audibly distinctive, as children and sometimes teachers use languages other than

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English. And a single classroom or setting can vary in the course of a day: It can incorporate talk-filled times and periods of silence, as well as teacher-directed lessons. This section contains descriptions of classroom research and practice that work toward combining children's needs for specific information and spontaneous expression, toward expanding their communicative competence, and toward being both multicultural and developmentally appropriate.

The Importance of Story

The use of story, whether told by adults or created through the dramatic play of children, is essential to the communication of human experience. It is also an important link among members of the same family, across families and generations, across communities and different cultures, and across oral and written modes of language. Teacher-researchers have been particularly thought-provoking as they have documented children's and their own stories. Vivian Paley, for example, has told numerous stories-within-stories, often focusing on individual children such as Reeny, the title character of a recent book, *The Girl with the Brown Crayon* (Paley, 1997). Paley tells of Reeny's and other children's fascination with particular published stories by Leo Lionni while she links the stories with and reveals her own struggle with questions of school and society: How do children respond—in and out of the context of stories—to those who are "different" from themselves? Do children benefit from racially integrated education? How do parents answer such a question? How does she herself address it, after decades in the classroom? One of the strengths of storytelling is that it allows for multiple plots and endings. Like other storytellers, Paley formulates not solutions, but possibilities, within the context of life in early childhood classrooms (see also Dyson & Genishi, 1994; Paley, 1979, 1981, 1995).

Stories and Their Variation. Educators often assume that children who have had stories told or read to them are likely to join the community of the literate with ease, since stories told should be bridges to stories read. But this assumption rests on shared definitions of story, which do not always exist (Cazden, 1988; Heath, 1983a). Karen Gallas (1992), a first/second-grade teacher-researcher, has also illustrated the variation that children introduce when they create stories. For instance, when Gallas decided to modify sharing time in her classroom, she asked children to volunteer to participate, rather than asking everyone to take a turn. Jiana, a girl who remained silent for a period of time, eventually volunteered, although she had few material things to show or share. After a

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class trip to the zoo, however, Jiana chose to tell a fictitious story about petting a gorilla. Gallas told her that this was a time for "true stories," an action she regretted. She later allowed Jiana to share her story, which continued over time and evolved into a new genre of story, one that grew and incorporated Jiana's classmates as main characters. The lesson for Gallas was profound, especially because she had wondered at the beginning of the school year if Jiana should be referred for special education. Gallas's flexibility allowed for a new child-developed definition of story. Accomplishments such as Jiana's are reminders that stories are like other culturally derived phenomena; there is nothing inherently "better" about one style of storytelling over another, just as there is nothing inherently better about one language or dialect over another.

Story as Drama: Playing Roles. "In play a child behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102). Child-watchers know that when children engage in pretend or dramatic play, they take on characteristics of people who behave and speak differently from themselves. Children can display what they are learning in novel ways. In their self-contained English-as-a-second-language classroom, these four children dramatize a familiar tale, incorporating vocabulary previously introduced by the teacher: Penny (Cantonese speaker), Oleg (Russian), Daniel (Albanian), and Ogusan (Turkish) sit at their table, reenacting the story again and again, changing roles and adding stage directions:

> PENNY: You pigs. You three pigs.
> OGUSAN: I'm second 'cause I'm gonna, I'm gonna build strong house.
> OLEG: He's the third little, the third little. He's the third house.
> DANIEL: No. I wanna be the big bad wolf (Penny becomes the third little pig).
> PENNY: My house not broke. I have strong house—strong house.
> OGUSAN: (to Daniel, the wolf) You can't blow. Get a something.
> DANIEL: I got an idea. I'll get a lad (ladder). Ow! (pretending to land in the hot soup). (Fassler, 1995, pp. 102–103)

For the final enactment that day, Penny becomes the first girl in the class to claim the wolf role, asserting, "I'm gonna be the wolf!" and the boys eagerly prompt her through the part (pp. 102–103). Children in this class clearly weave teacher-presented vocabulary, such as *second, third, strong,* and *ladder,* into their dramatic play. Like children learning a first language, these children construct in their second language their own understandings of its many rules. Errors are naturally a part of this interactive process.

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The dramatic play setting, enjoyable and usually free from adult intervention, truly encourages talk that is "a head taller" than the ordinary. It can also push children to take others' points of view, as they create scripts for their characters (Nelson & Gruendel, 1979). Representing through play talk the way others think or present themselves can enrich children linguistically and cognitively, whether they are bilingual or monolingual (Reynolds & Jones, 1997; Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, 1993). Thus opportunities for dramatic play, so often limited to preschools and kindergartens, would also benefit children in the primary grades, as the next example demonstrates.

Ms. Raney, a second-grade teacher, has her children act out different roles as they read the play "The Bremen Town Musicians" together:

> DOG: Good morning.
> DONKEY: Good morning. Where is your—where's your Mastah?
> DOG: I'm running away from her.
> DONKEY: That's funnah. I'm runnin' away from mine. For many years it's been nothing but work, work, work. Now that I'm old and tired, he wants to get rid of me. . . . Where are you going? (Genishi & Dyson, 1984, p. 201)

To teach children about their own language, Ms. Raney audiotapes her children in different speaking situations, so that they can hear themselves sound casual in some and more formal in others—as Ms. Raney says, more "how they talk on TV." Alex, as the donkey, talks in TV talk, though at another time he described a picture in this way: "Dat cah right dere goin' to hit da cub [curb] 'n dat cah right dere goin' ta hit da ho'se'n dat cah right dere goin' to hit da do-ug [dog]" (Genishi & Dyson, 1984, p. 201). When playing the donkey, Alex uses some features of the sound system of standard English, pronouncing crisply and carefully (*going*, instead of *goin'*), whereas in the second example, he uses many features of his own community's dialect, African American vernacular or Black English. Ms. Raney has her children both dramatize plays in standard English and speak in their own dialect in less formal situations. Without the use of repetitious language drills, she acts on a belief that children should grow in their communicative competence, by adding standard English to their repertoires while they develop as speakers, writers, and readers.

The many facets of story, then, provide showcases for children's abilities in language at the same time that they present teachers with opportunities for judicious intervention. The intervention may be direct, as when a first-grader struggles with the spelling of a word in her story that she wants to "get right," or it may be more subtle, as when a teacher urges a

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child to try the home corner one day during choice time. Teachers can assess aspects of language use, such as fluency, in oral storytelling, complexity of speech, extent of bilingualism, or imaginativeness in dramatic play by careful watching and listening. These aspects of oral language are not often measured by standardized tests but are important to teachers who aim to extend children's communicative competence. (See Genishi & Borrego Brainard [1995] for further discussion of assessment.)

Talking Across the Curriculum

Much of what is accessible to young children is embedded in the talk of stories, although not all learners are drawn to literary or fictional stories. Thus offering opportunities to talk about experiences related to social studies, the arts, science, or math is also important. A child's drawing easily leads to a discussion of its content or a conversation about the child's name, which she or he has written or asked a teacher to write. Science, too, when taught with children's ways of learning in mind, is another area that is enhanced through talk (see Gallas, 1995).

Dyson (1993) describes how Louise, a primary grade teacher, capitalizes on children's talk when she asks her class how to find an answer to Brett's science-related question, "Where does space begin and end?"

> MOLLIE: Ask a scientist.
> JAMEEL: Read a book or think about it.
> JULIAN: Go in a space rocket.
> LOUISE: Maybe we should do some empirical research.
> BERTO: Yeah, but Louise doesn't know very much about going into a space rocket and going up to space either.
>
> Louise has to agree with Berto's evaluation. What she has done, she says, is "pretty much what Jameel suggested." She has gone to the school library and gotten three space books. But she is not happy with them. The copyright dates are in the 1960s.
>
> LOUISE: Let me tell you something, folks. In 1960, I was in high school. They've learned a lot about space since I was in high school.
> BRAD: We weren't even born.
> SHAWNDA: Usually people who graduated then, they be dead by now.
>
> The notion of the copyright dates is fascinating to the children, and for the remainder of the year, one child or another will remind Louise to check the date when she reads to them. (p. 36)

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In Louise's class, questions that originate in one "subject area" easily blend with others, expanding the content of discussions and influencing thinking and talk over time.

Almost every activity presents an opportunity for talk when teachers nurture it. The computer, the object of scrutiny and controversy in some early childhood programs, is a machine that could be socially isolating and impersonal. But like many other things, it can also prompt talk. In the following example, first-graders are using a computer program to create designs on their screens:

> FLORA: Help him. He doesn't know how to do it.
> MARGARET: (to Juan) Want me to help you?
> JUAN: Yeah.
> MARGARET: OK. First, press that one down (demonstrates. Juan presses the key while Margaret presses another.) There.
> JUAN: I can do it.
> MARGARET: OK, and you keep pushing that one (goes back to her own computer, but quickly checks Juan's again). Now you need to make your plus (a cross-like shape), so you go up here and you do that, and go here, like that (she touches the screen as she traces a cross). If you need help, just ask me, OK? (Genishi, 1988a, p. 187)

Computer activity among first-graders and younger children can be talk-generating and cooperative (Genishi, 1988a; Genishi, McCollum, & Strand, 1985). The easily viewed computer screen can lead to children's learning from and helping each other.

CONCLUSIONS

Everything in this chapter acts in praise of children's enormous accomplishments as communicators in varied settings. Returning to the questions about Daniel's, Jerry's, and Ogusan's talk at the beginning of the chapter, we now know that like all children, the three have become speakers and learners through a complex process over time. With the human gift for learning language in interaction with people and objects, they have figured out huge numbers of rules related to the phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of their home language and are on a path toward learning the rules of English, a second language. As active, thinking children, they have been at the core of the learning process. We know, too, that the language adults hear in school settings represents tiny bits of any child's linguistic and communicative competence. If a child's

communicative development could be viewed like a kaleidoscope that is constantly moving, individual teachers would see only a few of the intricate patterns that make up the whole of children's communicative histories.

The classroom or center is only one setting in which that history evolves. So much more of it has been embedded in children's own communities, where the events and conversations of everyday life have a seamless look and feel. For some children, the seamlessness of the years outside of school ends abruptly when they enter a setting where adults talk and behave differently from their parents or friends. Unless there are opportunities to learn "school talk," in partnership with supportive others, a center or school may become an uncomfortable and difficult place for the child.

Teachers ease the transition to school when they nurture talk with these characteristics across the curriculum:

1. Talk between adults and children and between children serves a variety of purposes or functions. That is, language is used to inform, tell stories, question, pretend, have fun, discuss, plan, and so on.
2. Since talk flows when people have something to talk about or tell each other, teachers provide for and engage the children in activities and experiences that are the focus of talk.
3. Conversations are comfortable for both child and teacher. Talk is fluent because the communicators are absorbed in getting their messages across, and their conversations are meaning-oriented, not form-oriented.

Though the language forms—and sometimes the language—that a child uses may not always match the teacher's, the communicative purposes of the two can match. In developmentally appropriate settings, educators choose collaboratively with parents the range of purposes to be included, depending on their values and their views of language and learning.

The teacher plays a critical role in deciding whether oral language is inaudible or provides a "language bath" for children throughout the day. Before children read and write with ease, talk is the adult's versatile and ready tool for finding out what children know, what their individual social histories are, which adult meanings elude them, and how they view their experiences. In the complex processes of teaching and learning, talk makes visible some of children's thinking. Thus teachers draw on their own knowledge of development, language, and human communities as they try to see what children see, with the goal of helping them experience and know more.

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